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Socrates and Plato

Time Line for Socrates

470 BC	Is born in Athens, Greece, the son of Sophroniscus, a stonemason, and Phaenarete, a midwife.
470–400	Grows up during the "golden age" of Greece—his father, an intimate friend of the son of Aristides the Just, provides Socrates an acquaintanceship with the members of the Pericles circle.
	Serves with valor in the Peloponnesian War.
	Marries Xanthippe. They have seven or eight children.
	Is declared the wisest man by the Oracle at Delphi.
	Is put on trial for corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens.
399	Is found guilty and forced to drink hemlock.

Socrates wrote nothing. All that we know of him is from the writings of Aristophenes (The Clouds)*, Plato, and Xenophon.*

Time Line for Plato

427 BC	Is born in Athens, Greece, to a prominent family. Following his father's death, his mother marries Pyrilampes, a close friend of Pericles.
405–400	Studies with Socrates.
399	Attends the trial and execution of Socrates.
387	Establishes the Academy. Later, Eudoxius, respected mathematician, unites his school, located at Cyzicus, with the Academy.
367	Accepts Aristotle into the Academy.
347	Dies in Athens.

Although scholars continue to debate the time frame of Plato's writings, the following are generally attributed to each period:

Early Period	Works, usually referred to as Socratic dialogues, focus on ethics. Included in this period are *Apology, Crito, Charmides, Laches, Euthyphro, Euthydemus, Cratylus, Protagoras,* and *Gorgias.*

Middle Period	Works focus on theory of ideas and metaphysical doctrines. Included in this period are *Meno, Symposium, Phaedo, The Republic,* and *Phaedrus.*
Late Period	Works focus on a reconsideration of the middle period, most notably the theory of ideas. Included in this period are *Theaetetus, Parmenides, Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, Timaeus,* and *The Laws.*

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy begins in the West with a group of philosophers variously known as the natural philosophers or the pre-Socratics. Men—and the history of Western philosophy has been dominated by males—such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Heraclitus were all engaged in an attempt to discover the secrets of the natural world, to reduce the mass of phenomena to a few manageable principles, and to understand their natural environments. What held them together was a belief that one could reason one's way to the truth, that by looking at natural effects one could deduce their causes. What distinguished one from the other was that they each reasoned their way to different causes. For some, the natural world was reducible to one immovable substance. For others, there were four basic elements (earth, air, fire, and water). Others saw five or six or even more basic causes.

This led a group of philosophers, the Sophists, to react against the program of the natural philosophers. Whereas the natural philosophers assumed that an educated person, a wise person, was one who knew the *truth* about things *natural,* the Sophists claimed that since "reason" generated so many different conclusions, there was something unreliable about reason itself. If, the Sophists suggested, reason were a reliable tool, it should always yield the same results. It did not; hence, the Sophists shifted inquiry away from an attempt to discover the truth about the natural world to an attempt to teach a useful skill.

The Sophists were the first professional teachers. They went around to the families of young boys—again, notice this orientation toward males—and offered to teach those boys how to argue persuasively. The Sophists said, in effect: We don't care what your position is. We don't care whether you are telling the truth or not. We will teach you how to make your case and how to win arguments. This was an especially valuable skill because eventually those boys would, as heads of households, have to speak in the public forums that constituted Greek democracy. If they could not speak well, their family's fortune would suffer.

Into this mix—a mix that included a switch from the educated person as she or he who knew the truth about the natural world to the educated person as she or he who could argue persuasively regardless of the truth or falsity of the position—came the character Socrates.

If one reads the dialogue *Apology* carefully, one will see that two of the accusations against Socrates suggest that Socrates was both a natural philosopher and a Sophist at the same time. Certainly, since one was a reaction against the other, Socrates cannot be both. But what was Socrates? What was his doctrine? Why was he so important? We will try to answer those questions in the second part of this introduction.

Most of what we know about Socrates comes from three sources. Socrates did not write; indeed, he distrusted the written word, and so we must rely on the plays of Aristophenes and the dialogues of Xenophon and Plato.[1] For our purposes, we will concentrate on those writings that are clearly the most important, both philosophically and historically, that is, the writing of Socrates' student, Plato.

Most commentators divide Plato's writing into three major periods. In the early dialogues, *Apology, Charmides,* and *Phaedo,* for example, Plato gives a fairly accurate portrayal of Socrates. Plato was almost like a "fly on the wall" or a tape recorder, and one "hears" dialogues that may actually have taken place. This is the place to go to find out what Socrates was about and what he was teaching. In the middle period, *The Republic* is a good example of Plato's using Socrates to espouse his (Plato's) own doctrine. That doctrine is called the Theory of the Forms, and the middle period is the place to go if one wants to see what the mature Plato thought. Toward the end of his career, Plato had some doubts about his theory; in later dialogues like *Parmenides, Theaetetus,* and *Sophist,* one sees Plato rethinking and, perhaps, rejecting the theory. At the same time, because Socrates was Plato's mouthpiece in the middle period, the character of Socrates now becomes a minor figure, becomes a figure of ridicule and scorn, or drops out altogether. The later dialogues are not the place to go to get an accurate picture of Socrates.

So who was Socrates, and what did he espouse? The dialogue *Apology* is probably the best place to start. As mentioned previously, Socrates was on trial for his life. After rejecting a number of the more far-fetched accusations (accusations that suggested he was a natural philosopher and a Sophist), Socrates wonders what the real charge against him is. He settles on the charge that he is guilty of corrupting the morals of the youth of Athens.

As one will see, "Socratic irony" is an apt description. Socrates, in the company of his students, engaged those with a reputation for wisdom in a dialogue. Over the course of those dialogues, Socrates discovered, and so did his students and the people who were questioned, that those with a reputation for wisdom did not always deserve it. Socrates was wiser than the "wisest" people because he knew his own limits: he knew that he did not know, while they mistakenly thought they did. For Socrates, the educated person is precisely the person who knows her or his limitations, who knows that she or he does not know.

There are two points that are worthy of consideration. The first is that this person, whom many consider to be one of the two great teachers in the Western tradition (Jesus is the other), professed to have virtually no doctrine and said that what he knew was unimportant. Over and over again, in the *Apology,* the *Phaedrus,* and the *Charmides,* Socrates suggests that true wisdom is the property of the gods, and that what he has—this human wisdom, this knowledge of his own limitations—is worth hardly anything at all.

The second point is that Socrates puts an enormous amount of weight, some might call it faith, on the power of the dialogue, that back-and-forth linguistic motion between speakers, to uncover the truth. When Socrates discusses ideas with those with a reputation for wisdom, a truth always emerges from the dialogue. The dialogue allows the truth to emerge—in the excerpt from *The Republic,* the truth is about some mistaken

[1]A dialogue is perhaps best understood as a focused attempt by a group of speakers to solve a limited number of problems or to answer a few questions.

claims to knowledge. Socrates is different from the Sophists because he thinks there is a "truth" to be discovered. He is different from the natural philosophers because the method that he uses—discourse, dialogue, conversation—is public and communal; it is open to scrutiny in a way that reasoning, as a purely mental activity, is not.

Plato, as one would expect from a student, took much from his teacher Socrates. For Plato, education is a matter of leading a person from mere belief to true knowledge. In his classic "Allegory of the Cave," Plato suggests that we, as uneducated persons, are chained in a cave, seeing shadows on the wall and mistakenly believing that the shadows (and the cave itself) are the real things. Education involves breaking those chains and leading a person from the cave into the bright sunshine. The good teacher does this through the dialectical process, leading the student as far as she or he is capable. The best students—those most philosophical, those best educated—will use the dialectical process to discover true beauty, goodness, and justice. Plato is different from his teacher, Socrates, precisely because the wisdom that Plato's students would discover is worth a good deal; that is, it involves knowledge of objective standards (the Forms) that will enable people to lead good, productive lives.

The following selections include one from the *Apology* and two from *The Republic.* The first section from *The Republic* presents an introduction to the Theory of the Forms. In the second, Plato presents a story, "The Allegory of the Cave," which is meant to shed light on the theory.

FROM PLATO'S *APOLOGY* (CA. 399 BC)

I dare say that someone will ask the question, "Why is this, Socrates, and what is the origin of these accusations of you: for there must have been something strange which you have been doing? All this great fame and talk about you would never have arisen if you had been like other men: tell us, then, why this is, as we should be sorry to judge hastily of you." Now I regard this as a fair challenge, and I will endeavor to explain to you the origin of this name of "wise," and of this evil fame. Please to attend then. And, although some of you may think that I am joking, I declare that I will tell you the entire truth. Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, such wisdom as is attainable by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom, which I may fail to describe, because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness shall be the God of Delphi. You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him

whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was any one wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered, that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself; but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly, I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise, and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is,—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the "Herculean" labors, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. When I left the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to speak of this, but still I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared

to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and in this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets;—because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom—therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies. And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquisition into the wisdom of any one, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god. . . .

FROM PLATO'S *THE REPUBLIC* (CA. 366 BC)

Book VI

Conceive then, said I, as we were saying, that there are these two entities, and that one of them is sovereign over the intelligible order and region and the other over the world of the eyeball, not to say the sky-ball, but let that pass. You surely apprehend the two types, the visible and the intelligible.

I do.

Represent them then, as it were, by a line divided into two unequal sections and cut each section again in the same ratio—the section, that is, of the visible and that of the intelligible order—and then as an expression of the ratio of their comparative clearness and obscurity you will have, as one of the sections of the visible world, images. By images I mean, first, shadows, and

then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth, and bright texture, and everything of that kind, if you apprehend.

I do.

As the second section assume that of which this is a likeness or an image, that is, the animals about us and all plants and the whole class of objects made by man.

I so assume it, he said.

Would you be willing to say, said I, that the division in respect of reality and truth or the opposite is expressed by the proportion—as is the opinable to the knowable so is the likeness to that of which it is a likeness?

I certainly would.

Consider then again the way in which we are to make the division of the intelligible section.

In what way?

By the distinction that there is one section of it which the soul is compelled to investigate by treating as images the things imitated in the former division, and by means of assumptions from which it proceeds not up to a first principle but down to a conclusion, while there is another section in which it advances from its assumption to a beginning or principle that transcends assumption, and in which it makes no use of the images employed by the other section, relying on ideas only and progressing systematically through ideas.

I don't fully understand what you mean by this, he said.

Well, I will try again, said I, for you will better understand after this preamble. For I think you are aware that students of geometry and reckoning and such subjects first postulate the odd and the even and the various figures and three kinds of angles and other things akin to these in each branch of science, regard them as known, and, treating them as absolute assumptions, do not deign to render any further account of them to themselves or others, taking it for granted that they are obvious to everybody. They take their start from these, and pursuing the inquiry from this point on consistently, conclude with that for the investigation of which they set out.

Certainly, he said, I know that.

And do you not also know that they further make use of the visible forms and talk about them, though they are not thinking of them but of those things of which they are a likeness, pursuing their inquiry for the sake of the square as such and the diagonal as such, and not for the sake of the image of it which they draw? And so in all cases. The very things which they mold and draw, which have shadows and images of themselves in water, these things they treat in their turn as only images, but what they really seek is to get sight of those realities which can be seen only by the mind.

True, he said.

This then is the class that I described as intelligible, it is true, but with the reservation first that the soul is compelled to employ assumptions in the investigation of it, not proceeding to a first principle because of its inability to extricate itself from the rise above its assumptions, and second, that it uses as images or likenesses the very objects that are themselves copied and adumbrated by the class below them, and that in comparison with these latter are esteemed as clear and held in honor.

I understand, said he, that you are speaking of what falls under geometry and the kindred arts.

Understand then, said I, that by the other section of the intelligible I mean that which the reason itself lays hold of by the power of dialectic, treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, and springboards so to speak, to enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all, and after attaining to that again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so to proceed downward to the conclusion, making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas.

I understand, he said, not fully, for it is no slight task that you appear to have in mind, but I do understand that you mean to distinguish the aspect of reality and the intelligible, which is contemplated by the power of dialectic, as something truer and more exact than the object of the so-called arts and that those who contemplate them are compelled to use their understanding and not their senses, yet because they do not go back to the beginning in the study of them but start from assumptions you do not think they possess true intelligence about them although the things themselves are intelligibles when apprehended in conjunction with a first principle. And I think you call the mental habit of geometers and their like mind or understanding and not reason because you regard understanding as something intermediate between opinion and reason.

Your interpretation is quite sufficient, I said. And now, answering to these four sections, assume these four affections occurring in the soul—intellection or reason for the highest, understanding for the second, belief for the third, and for the last, picture thinking or conjecture—and arrange them in a proportion, as their objects partake of truth and reality.

I understand, he said. I concur and arrange them as you bid.

Book VII

Next, said I, compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this. Picture men dwelling in a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads. Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves, above which they show the puppets.

All that I see, he said.

See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of these bearers presumably speaking and others silent.

A strange image you speak of, he said, and strange prisoners.

Like to us, I said. For, to begin with, tell me do you think that these men would have seen anything of themselves or of one another except the shadows cast from the fire on the wall of the cave that fronted them?

How could they, he said, if they were compelled to hold their heads unmoved through life?

And again, would not the same be true of the objects carried past them?

Surely.

If then they were able to talk to one another, do you not think that they would suppose that in naming the things that they saw they were naming the passing objects?

Necessarily.

And if their prison had an echo from the wall opposite them, when one of the passers-by uttered a sound, do you think that they would suppose anything else than the passing shadow to be the speaker?

By Zeus, I do not, said he.

Then in every way such prisoners would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of the artificial objects.

Quite inevitably, he said.

Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to them. When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? And if also one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him?

Far more real, he said.

And if he were compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard them as in very deed more clear and exact than the objects pointed out?

It is so, he said.

And if, said I, someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real?

Why, no, not immediately, he said.

Then there would be need of habituation, I take it, to enable him to see the things higher up. And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the

appearances in the heavens and heaven itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by day the sun and the sun's light.

Of course.

And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place.

Necessarily, he said.

And at this point he would infer and conclude that this it is that provides the seasons and the courses of the year and presides over all things in the visible region, and is in some sort the cause of all these things that they had seen.

Obviously, he said, that would be the next step.

Well then, if he recalled to mind his first habitation and what passed for wisdom there, and his fellow bondsmen, do you not think that he would count himself happy in the change and pity them?

He would indeed.

And if there had been honors and commendations among them which they bestowed on one another and prizes for the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass and best able to remember their customary precedences, sequences, and coexistences, and so most successful in guessing at what was to come, do you think he would be very keen about such rewards, and that he would envy and emulate those who were honored by these prisoners and lorded it among them, or that he would feel with Homer and greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man, and endure anything rather than opine with them and live that life?

Yes, he said, I think that he would choose to endure anything rather than such a life.

And consider this also, said I. If such a one should go down again and take his old place would he not get his eyes full of darkness, thus suddenly coming out of the sunlight?

He would indeed.

Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in 'evaluating' these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark—and this time required for habituation would not be very short—would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?

They certainly would, he said. . . .

Questions

1. What is Socrates' definition of wisdom in the *Apology?*
2. Do you think Socrates was treated fairly? Explain.
3. Was Socrates really surprised by the charges brought against him? Explain.
4. Should he have been surprised? Explain.
5. What do you think of Socrates' teaching style?
6. Have you had teachers like Socrates?
7. If so, did you learn much from them? Explain.
8. Draw a picture representing the story of the cave, and then explain the picture to your neighbor.
9. Would those persons chained in the cave have reason to believe the person who returned to the cave? Explain.
10. Assume you were the person who had escaped. How would you explain the world outside the cave to the prisoners?
11. Restate the Theory of the Forms in your own words.
12. How is the definition of wisdom offered in *The Republic* different from that offered in the *Apology?*
13. In what ways is the educational system implicit in *The Republic* similar to (or different from) the American system?
14. In what ways is it better (or worse)?
15. Formulate your own definition of an educated person.